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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature concerning attitudes of fifth and sixth grade students to provide background information for instructional designers and scriptwriters from the Skills Essential to Learning Project, which develops television/film series and related print materials for different grade levels to enhance the teaching of thinking skills in the context of major curriculum areas. The following topics are addressed: children's attitudes towards parents and peers; children's perceptions of their peers (who is the popular child?); sex segregation in the peer group; play interests of children; children's attitudes toward school subjects (mathematics, science, social studies, and reading); teachers, attitude, and achievement; and the personality traits of successful and unsuccessful students. Thirty-four references are listed. (LMM)

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Skills Essential To Learning Television Project:

RESEARCH REPORT

FIFTH AND SIXTH GRADERS: THEIR ATTITUDES ABOUT PARENTS, PEERS, SCHOOL, AND THEMSELVES

September 1976

box a, bloomington, indiana 47401

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The Agency for Instructional Television is a nonprofit American-Canadian organization established in 1973 to strengthen education through television and other technologies. AIT develops joint program projects involving state and provincial agencies, and acquires and distributes a wide variety of television and related printed materials for use as major learning resources. It makes many of the television materials available in audiovisual formats. AIT's predecessor organization, National Instructional Television, was founded in 1962. The AIT main offices and Midwestern office are in Bloomington, Indiana; there also are regional offices in the Washington D.C., Atlanta, and San Francisco areas.

The working paper reported here was written by Janet Alexander of Indiana University and Candace Garrett of the University of New Mexico, for the Skills Essential to Learning Television Project, of the Agency for Instructional Television.

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FIFTH AND SIXTH GRADERS: THEIR ATTITUDES ABOUT PARENTS, PEERS, SCHOOL, AND THEMSELVES

The self-identity of children in grades one to three is largely tied up with adults. Children in grades one to three feel close to their parents and feel that teachers are very important people. By about fourth grade, children's identification with their teachers begins to drop off. Parents continue to play an important role in fourth, fifth, and sixth graders' lives, but the children's peer group becomes an increasingly significant factor (Long, Henderson and Ziller, 1972). This same trend can be seen when children's orientation toward the family is measured. One study reported that 87% of the fourth graders questioned were family-oriented, 50% of the eight graders were family-oriented, and only 32% of the tenth graders were family-oriented (Hartup, 1970).

There are several possible explanations for this shift toward the peer group and away from the family. One explanation is that in our society, children are not given the chance to become responsible members of the adult world. Since they are not given a constructive way to contribute to the maintenance of the household nor an important

role in the work world, they are forced to get their status and sense of importance from the peer group (Ausubel & Sullivan, 1970).

Another theory is that children in our culture are increasingly separated from contact with adults. Today's children see less and less of their extended family, and because so many mothers as well as fathers work outside the home, they also see less of their own parents. (Bronfenbrenner, 1973). Instead of walking to school and stopping in at the corner store to say hello to the owner, more and more children ride to school on a bus, thereby missing even the neighborhood experiences that used to put them in touch with adults. As a result, peers are becoming important socializing agents at an increasingly early age. Bronfenbrenner reports a 1959 study showing that children turned from parents to peers for advice at about the seventh grade. He claims that it now happens even earlier.

In our country, the peer group is relatively free of adult control, and its values do not always support adult values. Bronfenbrenner compared the effect of the peer group on sixth graders in the United States and in the Soviet Union, where the peer group is very much under adult control. He tested the children's "readiness to engage in morally disapproved behavior such as cheating on a test, denying responsibility for property damage, etc." American children were much more ready to engage in these behaviors than were the Soviet children. The United States children were even more willing to engage in these activities if they were told their peer group would know about it.

Although the peer group is becoming increasingly important to fifth and sixth graders, children this age do not yet report the high

degree of difficulty in relationships with their parents that is found among students in the eighth grade and higher (Kokenes, 1974).

The fifth and sixth graders are very much in a time of transition. Their parents' values are important to them, their peers' values are increasingly important to them, but they have not yet reached the stage where these two sets of values have come into real conflict.

Children's Perceptions of Their Parents

Several studies have shown that children perceive mothers and fathers in different ways. Children from first to sixth grade consistently label their mothers as more nurturant than their fathers. Fathers are consistently viewed as more competent, more punitive, and more a source of fear and power than mothers (Kagan, 1956; Kagan & Lemken, 1960). However, these results occurred when children were forced to make a choice between mother and father. When the children were allowed to label both their mother and father as nurturant, they proceeded to do just that (Kagan, Hosken, & Watson, 1961). This indicates that in their home situation, children do perceive their fathers, as well as their mothers, as nurturant.

Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes about school seem to be important factors in influencing how children feel about school. Children who view their parents as supportive of school (1) feel more positive about school, and (2) use their abilities in school more than pupils who receive less support from their parents. This has been found true for elementary and junior high pupils, but not for senior high pupils, and "generally speaking, the younger the

pupil the more impact his perception of parental support of school has on his performance" (Luszki & Schmuck, 1969). This again is an indication that how elementary pupils' parents feel about things is still an important influence.

When one looks specifically at fifth and sixth graders' identification with their parents, some important sex differences emerge. When boys reach fifth and sixth grade, there apparently is a lessening in their identification with the mother, but not a corresponding increase in identification with the father (Long et al., 1972). When these factors are combined with the fact that fifth- and sixth-grade boys are also less identified with their teachers than are girls, a clear pattern emerges. Boys tend to be less identified with adults in general than are girls. This is consistent with the societal norm that males be more self-reliant and less person-oriented than girls.

Children's Self-Esteem

During grades one through four there is a steady rise in children's self-esteem. They are learning new things and feeling better about themselves as people. However, by fifth and sixth grades there seems to be a drop in children's self-esteem (Long et al., 1972). Sixth graders tend to be especially rejecting of themselves when compared with fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth graders (Kokenes, 1974). It has been hypothesized that this drop in self-esteem occurs because of the physiological changes that children this age experience. Another hypothesis suggests children's anxiety about moving on to seventh grade, which for many children involves making radical readjustments to school, produces the lowering of self-esteem.

Children's Perceptions of Their Peers

The following traits describe the characteristics of the "popular" fourth- and fifth-grade child: friendliness, sociability, outgoingness, leadership, enthusiasm, frequent laughter, good looks, tidiness, good sportsmanship (Ausubel & Sullivan, 1970; Hartup, 1970; Mussen, Conger, & Kagan, 1969). The least popular children show these traits: anxiety, uncertainty, withdrawal, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, hostility, obesity and facial disfigurement, and lack of sociability.

School children from ages six to ten already hold well-established stereotypes of other children's body types (Staffieri, 1967). They prefer children who have well-proportioned, muscular bodies to those who are either obese or very thin. The personalities of obese and very thin children were described in unfavorable terms, whereas well-proportioned, muscular children's personalities were described quite favorably. From approximately age eight, children have an accurate perception of their own body type and a clear preference to appear muscular and well-proportioned.

Children aged nine to thirteen at a summer camp were asked to describe their fellow campers (Yarrow & Campbell, 1969). The traits that were most important to the children concerned how the others interacted. The children were especially concerned with sociability and potentially hostile acts. They could describe with the most detail those children who had a strong emotional effect on them, either positive or negative, and paid particular attention to those who might be able to threaten or harm them in some way. Physical appearance was the trait next in importance after how the others interacted.

As in previously mentioned studies, the most-liked children were those who were friendly, sociable, and not aggressive. The least-liked children were reported to be less friendly and more aggressive. As would be expected, girls paid more attention to how nurturant others were, and boys paid more attention to acting-out, nonconforming behaviors, and withdrawn behaviors.

Sex Segregation in the Peer Group

The late elementary years have traditionally been seen as a time when boys prefer to play with boys and girls prefer to play with girls. Studies done in the 1920's and 1930's reported that children chose only same-sex people as their friends from fourth to eighth grade. However, this pattern has been changing, and in a more recent study (Broderick & Fowler, 1961) 15-20% of the children made cross-sex choices when asked who was their very best friend. When asked to choose four best friends, 52% of the children in fifth grade chose one or more people of the opposite sex.

Broderick and Fowler suggest that previously boys and girls used this pre-adolescent period for sex-role training, and thus kept to their own sexes because the roles they were training for were quite different. However, because sex roles are becoming more flexible, children now do not need same-sex peer groups to the extent that they formerly did.

Another study presents slightly different evidence. Damico (1975) observed peer interactions in an open classroom of eight- nine- and ten-year-olds and found very high rates of interaction among children of the same sex. Children did not spontaneously help opposite-sex children with their homework--such cross-sex interactions were generally initiated by the teacher.

So although the patterns of strict sex-segregation in peer groups may be breaking down somewhat, those patterns still do seem to exist to some degree among fifth and sixth graders. Part of this is due, of course, to the fact that boys and girls at this age have quite different interests.

Play Interests of Children

A comparison of children's play interests over the last sixty years (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1971) reveals that although girls show increasing preferences for what used to be considered traditionally male games, there are still pronounced differences in the preferences of the two sexes. The following is a ranking of games preferred by boys and girls in a study done in 1959.

BOYS

N.W. Ohio, 1959. N = 1370

1. Football Throw
2. Snowballs
3. Bicycle Riding
4. Hide and Seek
5. Basketball
6. Marbles
7. Tag
8. Swimming
9. Baseball
10. Cowboys
11. Checkers
12. Cops and Robbers
13. Cards
14. Bows and Arrows
15. Shooting
16. Racing
17. Fly Kites
18. Climbing
19. Darts
20. Soldiers
21. Tic Tac Toe
22. Fish
23. Tug-o-War
24. Boating
25. Horseshoes
26. Horseriding
27. Camping
28. Skating
29. Make Model Airplanes
30. Dodgeball
31. Wrestling
32. Building Forts
33. Bingo
34. Bandits
35. Hunt
36. Ping Pong
37. Seven Up
38. Roller Skating
39. Hunting
40. Use Tools
41. Boxing
42. King on the Mountain
43. Stoop Tag
44. Red Rover
45. Bowling

GIRLS

N.W. Ohio, 1959. N = 1319

1. Jump Rope
2. Hide and Seek
3. Tag
4. Bicycle Riding
5. Hopscotch
6. Checkers
7. Roller Skating
8. Dolls
9. Bingo
10. Cooking
11. Swimming
12. Cards
13. Stoop Tag
14. Jacks
15. Red Rover
16. Dressing-Up
17. Tic Tac Toe
18. Dance
19. Skating
20. School
21. Musical Chairs
22. Mother May I
23. Building Snowmen
24. Drop the Handkerchief
25. Seven Up
26. Houses
27. Follow the Leader
28. Sewing
29. Horse Riding
30. Monopoly
31. Simon Says
32. Throw Snowballs
33. Frozen Tag
34. Puzzles
35. Store
36. Raise Pets
37. Racing
38. Pick Up Sticks
39. Basketball
40. Ping Pong
41. Dodgeball
42. Fly Kites
43. Actresses
44. Marbles
45. Boating

Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1971) report that although girls have been broadening their play interests to include male games, boys have actually been narrowing their play choices to exclude female games. "There is little doubt that boys have been steadily lowering their preferences for games that have had anything to do with girls' play. So that it is, by implication, much more deviant behavior for a modern boy to play at, say, Dolls, Hopscotch, Jacks, Houses, Schools, Cooking, Jump Rope, Musical Chairs, Simon Says, and Singing games than it was for a boy to play at these things in the earlier historical periods covered by these studies" (p. 48).

The games that boys identified as very masculine were Football, Boxing, Wrestling, Horseshoes, Throwing Snowballs, Marbles, and Darts. If one compares the most popular games of both sexes, only five are on both lists: Hide and Seek, Tag, Bicycle Riding, Swimming, Cards.

The results of these studies show the play interests of children aged nine to fifteen. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1964) also had third through sixth graders pick out their favorite games. They found that fifty games differentiated between boys and girls. The male-preferred games, again, are primarily active, assertive games, while the female games include singing games and the less active dramatic play activities. The following is a list of the games which differentiated between the boys and girls:

Game Choices Differentiating Between Boys (N=928) and Girls (N=973)*

Masculinity		Femininity	
Item No.	Game	Item No.	Game
8	Bandits	1	Dolls
9	Soldiers	2	Dressing Up
10	Cowboys	3	Houses
13	Cops & Robbers	4	Store
14	Cars	5	School
18	Spacemen	6	Church
60	Marbles	16	Actors
64	Bows & Arrows	17	Actresses
65	Throw Snowballs	30	Stoop Tag
113	Darts	34	Ring-Around-the-Rosy
128	Wrestling	35	London Bridge
129	Baseball	36	Farmer in the Dell
131	Football	38	In & Out the Window
135	Basketball	41	Drop the Handkerchief
138	Boxing	44	Mulberry Bush
139	Shooting	47	Hopscotch
157	Fish	48	Jump Rope
158	Hunt	49	Jacks
164	Use Tools	87	Mother, May I?
168	Climbing	156	Dance
170	Make Radio	159	Sewing
171	Model Aeroplane	161	Cooking
172	Toy Trains	162	Knit
174	Work Machines	163	Crochet
178	Build Forts	175	Cartwheels

* All items differentiate between the sexes beyond the .01 level.

What does all this mean in terms of presenting television programs to fifth and sixth graders? It is obviously going to be difficult to find activities that both sexes are equally interested in, and some kind of balance will be necessary to satisfy both sexes.

Because strict sex-segregation in peer friendships is not as prevalent now as it used to be, the portrayal of some mixed-sex groupings would seem to be quite appropriate. Obviously, it would not be appropriate to portray mixed-sex groups of children in activities that are popular for only one sex. However, at least in those activities that are enjoyed by both sexes, such groupings would probably seem quite natural.

Activities with peers are certainly important to children this age, but fifth and sixth graders would probably be open to the portrayal of some activities with adults as well, since generally they are not in great conflict with their parents at this age.

Furthermore, the fact that fifth and sixth graders are so cued in to the social and physical characteristics of people must definitely be kept in mind when characters are created for the television programs.

Children's Attitudes Toward School Subjects

Mathematics. General opinion holds that math isn't a very popular subject among school children. However, this doesn't seem to be true for elementary-aged children. In one study of third, fourth, and sixth graders, 88% of the children reported that they really enjoyed arithmetic (Stright, 1970). In addition, among third through sixth graders there was an increasing trend to see arithmetic as useful at home, and a decrease in the attitude that they "wouldn't take it if they didn't have to."

However, this same study found that the older children were, the less popular arithmetic was as a subject. So although the children did on the whole enjoy arithmetic and see how useful it was for them, sixth graders were not liking arithmetic as well as third graders.

While the general attitude toward arithmetic of both fifth- and sixth-grade boys and girls is positive, it appears that in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades frustrations toward arithmetic begin to build (Aiken, 1970). Older subjects who describe themselves as afraid of math report that their problems with the subject began during the later elementary years.

Something especially crucial begins to happen to the attitudes of girls toward math around this time. Although girls like math as well as or better than boys in elementary school, by seventh grade girls like math less than boys. This sex difference in attitude toward math, which begins in junior high school, continues through adulthood (Aiken, 1976; Hilton & Berglund, 1974). Similarly, when sex differences in achievement in math are analyzed, no sex differences are found for elementary school children. However, by seventh grade, males have higher average achievement scores than females, and this difference between the sexes increases as the children get older (Hilton and Berglund, 1974). Also, by high school age, men are performing at a higher level than women on math aptitude tests (Shapiro, 1962).

It cannot be said that a negative attitude toward a subject causes poor achievement in that subject. However, it has been found that differences in the sexes' interest in math increases at a very similar rate to the differences in their achievement in math (Hilton & Berglund, 1974). The fact that as girls get older their attitudes toward math become more negative and their achievement in math decreases can probably be explained in this way:

> Members of each sex are encouraged in, and become interested in and proficient at, the kinds of tasks that are most relevant to the roles they fill currently or are expected to fill in the future. According to this view, boys in high school forge ahead in math because they and their parents and teachers know they may become engineers or scientists; while the girls know they are unlikely to need math in the occupations they will take up when they leave school (Eleanor Maccoby, quoted in Hilton and Berglund, 1974, p. 231).

Fifth and sixth grades are obviously crucial times for the development of attitudes toward math, especially for girls. If math can be made relevant to the girls at this time, perhaps their already existing positive attitudes toward math could be maintained. This could be done by (1) relating math to subjects that are already of interest to girls, and/or (2) incorporating role models, such as female scientists, to help girls see that math might be useful to them in the future.

Science. Upper elementary school children's attitudes toward science are also, on the whole, positive (Ayers & Price, 1975). Approximately 70% of the sixth graders questioned in one study reported holding positive attitudes toward science (Perrodin, 1966). However, "fourth grade students were more positive in their attitudes toward science than fifth grade students," and sixth grade students were even more negative than fifth grade students (Ayers & Price, 1975).

Negative attitudes continue to increase through eighth grade (Perrodin, 1966). This trend is similar to that found in attitudes toward math; as children get older, they like both science and math less. Such a trend may be partly a reflection on our schools. It may also be a result of the developmental stage of the children. Sixth-to-eighth graders may be at a more crucial period in their lives; they may be more critical of everything during this time, not just their school subjects (Perrodin, 1966).

Neither of these studies found a sex difference in attitude toward science before the eighth grade. However, it has been shown that sixth-grade boys have had more experience with science in the home than have sixth-grade girls (Rowland, 1968). Thus, boys bring with them to the classroom broader science experiences than do girls.

Social Studies. Very little research has been done concerning elementary school children's attitudes toward social studies. When the attitudes of seventh-to-twelfth graders are studied, boys seem to prefer social studies more than do girls (McTeer, 1975). McTeer suggests this may be due in part to "the fact that the content of the social studies curriculum is largely male-oriented. This male orientation is especially true of history and government, but is also found to a lesser degree in geography, sociology, and economics" (p. 168). He recommends giving more emphasis to the role of women in the social studies in the hope of increasing girls' interest in the subject.

Reading. A recent review of the research (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) concludes that there are very few sex differences in verbal ability for children under age eleven. However, from age eleven on, girls perform better in this area. Specifically in terms of reading, eleven-year-old girls do have a more favorable attitude toward recreational reading than do boys (Sauls, 1974).

Very distinct sex differences emerge when fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade children are asked what topics they like to read about. Both sexes like fiction books, especially humorous fiction, but there the similarities end. Girls prefer books about animals and fairytales, and like least books about sports, science, cars and racing. Boys prefer books about sports and cars and racing, and like least books about animals and fairytales (Fairleigh, Evard, & McDaniel, 1974).

Another study of fourth and fifth graders alone found similar preferences (Feeley, 1974). Boys preferred themes of sports, fantastic excitement, recreation, realistic excitement, and information, and

did not like themes of fantasy-comedy, social-empathy, and art. Girls preferred themes that were social-empathy--fun and excitement fantasy, social-empathy--people and problems, recreational, and hobbies-artistic. Girls did not like themes of social studies, science, and sports. Both sexes would prefer to watch a TV show or movie about any of these topics than to read about them.

It appears that boys and girls this age have widely differing areas of interest. To appeal to both sexes, topics for shows will have to be chosen from both the girls' and boys' lists of favorite subjects. Since humor and recreational topics seem to be common elements of interest, weaving them into the subjects chosen might make programs more appealing to both sexes.

Teachers, Attitude, and Achievement

Studies have consistently found only a low positive correlation between children's attitudes toward school subjects and their achievement in school. How children feel about the subjects they are studying just doesn't seem to have much effect on how well they learn those subjects (Jackson & Lahaderne, 1967; Neale, Gill & Tismer, 1970; Aiken, 1970, 1976). One study concludes:

> One must seriously consider the possibility that attitude toward school subjects...plays a limited role in student achievement. Viewed in this way, the results of the present study are consistent with the often voiced criticism that children learn in school not because they like to learn or value learning, but rather that they learn because the system compels them to learn, like it or not (Neale et al., 1970, pp. 236-7).

Numerous people have suggested that the sex of the teacher may play a significant role in how well students achieve. For example,

one researcher found that "...at the sixth grade level, boys tend to identify more strongly with male than with female teachers, while girls tend to identify with both male and female teachers more strongly than boys" (Forslund, 1974, p. 87). He postulated that sixth-grade boys with male teachers achieve more in school that sixth-grade boys with female teachers. A study of sixth graders in Albuquerque, however, revealed that:

> Boys achieve at a significantly higher level in science than do girls regardless of sex of teacher...girls achieve at a significantly higher level in language arts than do boys regardless of sex of teacher...No significant differences were found with respect to arithmetic or reading (Forslund, 1974, p. 88).

Various other studies have reached the same conclusion: sex of teacher has little effect on achievement, and specifically, boys do not achieve more with male teachers (Brophy & Good, 1974).

Personality Traits of Successful and Unsuccessful Students

Much work has been done in an effort to discover the personality traits of successful and unsuccessful students. A high achiever seems to be a person with a good self-concept and a feeling of personal worth. High achievers are not withdrawn, but rather have good school relations and a sense of belonging, with an absence of nervous symptoms. Low achievers have feelings of helplessness, discouragement, inadequacy, and nervousness (Aiken, 1976; Zimmerman & Allebrand, 1973).

The high achiever is not necessarily the popular student, however. When elementary children are making observations about their peers in the classroom, they seem to distinguish between the bright student and the friendly student. They describe the bright, ideal student as "a child who catches on easily and quickly, knows the right answer, reads well, is a rule follower, and is well-behaved. An intelligent, cooperative child." And they describe the friendly student in terms

very similar to those used to describe the popular child earlier in this paper: an "extroverted, social youngster who has many friends, who makes friends easily, and who plays with others more than by himself" (Rubenstein, Fisher, & Iker, 1975).

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